**Conducting field research during the pandemic:   
Safety, ethics, and limitations**

Rama is a 31 year old social work researcher from Mumbai. Her current research engagement is part of a three year grant that supports her research on the conditions of undertrial prisoners in Maharshtra’s prisons. Her research began in 2018, and since then she’s been visiting the Byculla Central Jail in Mumbai thrice every week to assess undertrials’ access to legal aid, access to *mulakat* (the right to visitation by family that prisoners in Indian carceral systems are entitled to), and the status of their trial in court. During the initial days of March[[1]](#footnote-1), Rama was allowed to visit the prison while wearing a mask, gloves, and sanitising her hands at regular intervals. But since the lockdown was announced, she hasn’t been able to continue with her research. “I spent the months of April, May, and June working from home, working with the data I had already collected. I was digitising it and coding it. But I knew that this was not enough and for my research to move forward I would have to resume my prison visits”, she tells me. Rama’s field work is typically divided between the prison and the courthouse, with her sometimes even visiting the families of prisoners who were in particularly distressing conditions. Courthouses were also closed during the lockdown and entry was permitted only to judicial staff presiding over ‘urgent’ matters. In November, Rama received a call from a jailor of Byculla Central Prison asking her if she could visit. Rama was nervous about returning to her fieldwork at a time when the country was still clocking over 50,000 cases a day and Maharashtra in particular recording close to 10,000 cases a day. When she entered the premises of the carceral facility the jail staff informed her that she could resume work in the prison but she wouldn’t be allowed entry into the barracks, which is where the prisoners are housed. She could visit the prison once a fortnight and meet with the prison staff to continue her research. If there was any information she needed from the prisoners, she could ask the Superintendent or the jailor and they would procure the information for her, they said. Rama’s grant comes to a close in 2021, and with close to nine months lost without any field work, it is uncertain whether her funding will be extended, or if her research will have to be curtailed. Meanwhile, her fortnightly visits to prison to meet the staff continue.

While most workplaces in the country are shifting to working from home, for field researchers, conducting research from home can be challenging—and in some cases, even impossible. The kind of research subjects that research in the social sciences study often includes marginalised communities and people living in vulnerable or precarious conditions. Conducting field work through telephonic interviews or digital mediums may not be possible for people living in informal settlements, engaged in daily waged labour, or living in conflict-stricken geographies, which are often the kinds of spaces that social science field work is conducted in. Continuing ongoing research during the pandemic or embarking on field work during the lockdown can be difficult for researchers owing not just to fears of infection, but also because of the ethically fraught nature of research in the social sciences. Institutional ethics committees and evidence of due diligence constitute an integral part of research engagements in the field, ensuring that researchers meet ethical standards of data collection. Under the circumstances of the pandemic, these ethical imperatives may become particularly urgent. Researchers not only have to adapt to shifting timelines of research, improvised methods of data collection, fears of delays or fund cuts, but also tackle the accountability of imperilling those already living in difficult conditions through the risks of infection. Some of these field workers might also be working towards offering essential social services, such as psychological and social support or legal aid, making their absence from the field particularly distressing for benefactors of these services. The World Health Organisation encourages working from home for all non-essential workforces, while also acknowledging the risks of exposure involved for ‘social care workers’, which could include such field researchers engaged in offering crucial on-ground assistance. These trying circumstances have put universities and research institutes in a fix. While universities like [Berkley](https://ehs.berkeley.edu/news-alerts/covid-19-precautions-and-considerations-travel-or-fieldwork) and [Duke](https://www.safety.duke.edu/news-events/essential-field-research-during-covid-19-pandemic) have published guidelines to follow during research – including maintaining social distancing, carrying a thermometer, fulfilling institute-mandated health checks prior to beginning field work, staying under quarantine if one is travelling to a different city for field work – the conditions shaping field work still remain largely uncertain.

Simran is a Research Associate working for a not-for-profit research institute in Lucknow that studies the implementation and impact of the [Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana](https://pmaymis.gov.in/) – a government initiative that aims to provide subsidised housing to the urban poor. Simran’s research requires for her to work closely in Bakshi ka Talab, a *nagar panchayat* in the south eastern part of Lucknow district. Simran travels 30 km from home to the *nagar panchayat*, situated at the peripheries of Lucknow, to speak with the authorities, follow up on the paperwork that beneficiaries submit to avail the scheme, and meet with beneficiaries who have been allotted housing under the scheme to help them proceed with construction. “Several of the documents that the *nagar panchayat* work with are yet to be digitised. Therefore, these interactions cannot be carried out telephonically. The beneficiaries that we work with often do not have the resources to access internet or smart phones, and therefore rely on our in-person visits to help them fill out forms or access government helpline facilities”, she says. “Field work involves collaborative work and *spontaneous interaction*, something that telephonic interviews cannot replicate,” she adds. A significant component of field work, especially in the social sciences, involves not just the collection of data, but building trust and rapport with the research subjects. This includes engaging in conversations that go beyond the scope of the research, and spending sufficient time on the field. “Sometimes I find that I am the only one in a room wearing a mask. I look for a quiet corner to have my lunch in, I try to spend as little time as possible on the field. All of this does affect the quality of field work,” Simran sighs.

A recent [report](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-0921-y) indicates that female researchers and early stage scholars have been particularly susceptible to the problems introduced to field research during the pandemic. While several scholars and social scientists have taken to [text messages](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0233874), Zoom calls and other [digital media](https://idpjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40249-020-00678-3) to conduct their research, these methods are severely restricted by issues of accessibility to the internet. The samples being studied therefore remain far too small and homogenous for researchers to be able to arrive at conclusive findings. While some have managed to produce remarkable research through [Zoom](https://twitter.com/brandonmwoo/status/1291176951370199042) calls, these stories remain exceptions to the rule. The Centre for Equity Studies, a Delhi based research institute working on issues of social exclusion, urban poverty, homelessness and inequality has published a set of instructive [guidelines](https://centreforequitystudies.org/conducting-social-science-research-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/) for conducting research through digital interviews and online focused group discussions, but also concede that these digital practices invite us to deliberate over issues of data privacy and digital security.

Piyali is a psychologist by training currently working for a mental health research project in Mumbai, committed to making mental health accessible to marginalised and disenfranchised communities. Piyali leads a team of field investigators who work on-ground with counsellors in government run counselling clinics in Dungarpur, Rajasthan. As a result of the lockdown, all field work now has to be conducted digitally. The last three months have been harrowing, where focus had to be shifted from research and capacity-building to creating sustainable digital platforms to enable communication and real-time documentation. “Our organisation has a dedicated telephonic offering telephonic emergency counselling to people in distress. This number was connected to a desk phone in the office. Since the lockdown we have had to find a way to reroute the calls to our personal phones without making our private contact information public, and also making sure all calls are not directed to the same counsellor”, Piyali explains. The organisation lost two precious months to this technical difficulty, around the time that reports of [increased domestic violence](https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-domestic-violence-complaints-at-a-10-year-high-during-covid-19-lockdown/article31885001.ece#:~:text=During%20the%20first%20four%20phases,not%20seek%20help%20in%20India.) and [mental illness](file:///D:\Admin\Downloads\outlookindia.com\website\story\india-news-is-mental-health-indias-next-pandemic\363308) emerged.

Sharvari is a social worker by training and is currently pursuing her M. Phil at a reputable university in Mumbai. Her initial research proposed to study the experiences of medical social workers placed across hospitals in Mumbai. But since the pandemic struck she decided against it for the safety concerns associated with accessing hospitals during this time, but also because of her guilt in intruding into the lives of already distressed healthcare workers. Meanwhile, taking cognizance of the situation, the institute issued a circular relieving its research scholars of all field work obligations, assuring them that research based on secondary sources would be accepted. However, Sharvari was still inclined to pursue field research. By the end of April, a month into the lockdown, she decided to study the role of grassroots-level community based organisations and their role in Covid relief in various low-income neighbourhoods across Mumbai. It involved a complete reworking of her existing research proposal and devising an entirely new course of action. Sharvari informs me that several of her colleagues have also had to abandon their earlier research objectives, especially those who were planning to conduct field work outside their home states.

Field work constitutes a key pedagogical aspect of teaching, learning and research in the social sciences. Education in the social sciences at the university level in India often demands a mandatory field work component whose fulfilment is essential to be awarded the degree. Social scientists and research scholars collect data about phenomena of social relevance, about disenfranchised communities, about people at risk, through immersive, extensive field work, which in turn informs policy decisions and government intervention. Researchers in the social sciences routinely navigate hostile environments, recalcitrant state authorities and systemic red-tapeism to produce knowledges about disempowered groups and endangered livelihoods. The objective of social justice is not to antagonise those in power, but to raise questions about accountability and systemic inaction. Under the circumstances of the pandemic, a curious ethical bind that researchers seem to be finding themselves in is having to make the choice between asking difficult questions and being sensitive to systemic vulnerabilities during these trying times. Like the conversations above reveal, field workers are in the peculiar dilemma of remaining committed to producing relevant and critical knowledge, while having to make the difficult decision of receding from their research.

1. India recorded its first Coronavirus infection in January, in the state of Kerala. The nationwide lockdown was announced on 22nd March. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)